DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 217 EC 192 118

TITLE	Facts about Learning Disabilities.
INSTITUTION	Texas State Dept. of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, Austin.
PUB DATE	Jun 80
NOTE	16p.; A product of Public Information Services.
AVAILABLE FROM	Public Information Services, Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, P.O. Box 12668, Austin, TX 78711 (single copy free).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Development; Children; Coping; Elementary Education; Family Relationship; *Learning Disabilities; Learning Problems; Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Self Esteem; *Student Characteristics

ABSTRACT

This brief booklet, which discusses characteristics and problems of learning disabled children, describes the typical learning-disabled child as one who frequently fails at school, appears disoriented, and has reading and language difficulties. The learning-disabled child is immature rather than abnormal, often functioning at a social and intellectual stage of development much younger than his chronological age. The learning-disabled child often copes by insisting on the rigid and inflexible rules and environments to which he or she is accustomed. Such children are frequently awkward, clumsy, and unable to understand time and spatial references. Learning-disabled children are also frequently able to embrace life, with a joyful, pure, and fresh perspective. Learning-disabled children must be taught to learn. Parents and teachers of children with learning disabilities must understand that the causes of learning disabilities are beyond their control and should plan realistically for the immediate future of the child, leaving long-range planning for the distant future as new knowledge in the field becomes available. The most important thing parents can do is to create structure and order in their children's lives and to offer constant help and encouragement in acquiring the everyday skills that lead to independence and a feeling of competence. Such children also need to understand that they are not retarded, but have a condition which makes learning difficult, that they will make it in the world, and that in the end, what counts are human qualities. (CB)

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Facts about Learning Disabilities

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"He can't tell the difference between 'b' and 'd.'"

"Will he ever learn the days of the week?"

"He can't stop talking for 5 minutes."

"Why won't he behave at school?"

"How could she put down the same answer to four different arithmetic problems?"

"He's so good and he tries so hard. Why can't he learn?"

WHO IS THIS CHILD?

Usually This Is:

- An intelligent child who fails at school.
- The child who at school age reads "on" for "no," writes "41" for "14," "p" for "d" or "q" or "b," and can't remember the sequence of letters that make up a word.
- The child who loses her homework, misplaces her book, doesn't know what day it is, or what year, or what season.

Frequently This Is:

- The child who can't picture things in his mind, who can't visualize or remember what he sees.
- The quiet child who bothers nobody in the classroom but does not learn.
- The older child whose language comes out jumbled, who stops and starts in the middle of a sentence or an idea, who talks about "hopsitals," "aminals" and "emenies."
- The child who can add and multiply but not subtract or divide, who can do math in his head but can't write it down.
- The child who skips words or adds them when he is reading aloud.

Consumed by Disorder

Most children are well-organized little human beings by school age. They have sorted, classified, categorized information into the proper mail boxes in their minds. They have achieved the maturation necessary to learn efficiently.

The learning disabled youngster is not ready on time. He is disorganized. He is consumed by disorder. He is immature rather than abnormal. A doctor would say that he suffers from neurological immaturity or minimal brain dysfunction. An educator would say that he has a learning disability. A parent would say: "Something is wrong."

The learning disabled child can't make sense of what he receives through his senses, even though his sight, hearing and other sense organs are all intact. The messages he receives are jumbled, scattered all over the place. He is distractable, which most people think is not paying attention; but, in fact, he is paying too much attention to too many things.

At age 7 or 8 he is frequently similar in his social behavior to the 2- and 3-year old. He craves center stage, not out of any base ambitions but because of immaturity. Because of his many difficulties (with tying shoe laces, organization of speech, reading), he is dependent longer on adults. The need for attention may equal the need for help, and many a learning disabled youngster cleverly has discovered that helplessness brings swift attention.

Also, there are many children who would so much rather receive negative attention than no attention that they purposely will cause trouble or "act out" to evoke an adult response. Often they would rather be thought of as "bad" than "dumb." Some youngsters will provoke trouble with other children to make sure they are not ignored; they can then complain about being teased or picked on, but they have been the center of everyone's attention.

Rigid and Inflexible

Because of his immaturity, the learning disabled child cannot deal with alternatives. He becomes anxious when he is taken to the park by a new, unfamiliar route. He is upset on a Sunday morning when his parents have breakfast in their pajamas—breaking the known routine of dress first, breakfast afterward. He won't accept a broken cookie, because a cookie is round; if the broken piece is jagged, it can't be a cookie. He doesn't recognize a teacher outside of school. He may appear paralyzed when faced with two equal choices, unable to select either one.

The inflexible child who wants what he wants when he wants it, no matter what is going on around him—a storm, a riot, an accident, a crisis—is the same child who doesn't see the wholeness of things. He is caught up in the details and misses the big picture.

Lost in Time and Space

The learning disabled child most often is lost in space—lost in up-down, left-right, above-below, top-bottom, in-out, into-out of, under-over, apart-together. He does not know automatically how to operate in space; he cannot visualize spaces. How can he know where the top shelf is if he is not sure that his feet are below his head?

He can't remember where to go, frequently becomes lost, loses not only himself but his possessions, and doesn't see things that are right in front of his nose. Often when he's asked to stand in front of his desk, he stands behind it. Frequently when he's asked to put the paper into the box, he puts it under the box.

This is why clearly defined spaces, or small spaces, spell safety to the learning disabled child. This is why security depends on the same seat at the dining room table, the same place in the car, the same chair at school.

A learning disabled child usually has a poor image of his own body. He does not connect the parts to the whole body. He does not know how far it extends or how much space it takes up. His development in this respect lags way behind what is usual for his chronological age. Frequently the learning disabled child is awkward and clumsy.

Free Spirit

There's a sheer joy—temporary though it may be—that many a learning disabled child brings to life. He seems to embrace life with an enthusiasm and jauntiness that most of us lose with maturity. The spontaneous expression of feeling, the unedited comment, the untrampled-upon gesture are all trademarks of the impulsive child. There's a freshness which he conveys, perhaps because he doesn't see the whole picture, that turns our attention to experiences we have come to take for granted. With all the heartache he feels and brings into his home, he often

touches the family with a freshness, a pure, natural quality.

School Problems

"How's school?" is the question all grownups ask. That's where the child is expected to "deliver the goods" in a productive society.

But learning disabled children need to be taught how to learn. Their reading, spelling and arithmetic skills often range from considerably below to far below the norm. Frequently their spoken language, thinking and behavior are also extremely delayed.

No matter how much they love him, parents take the child's failure as their own. So they try by every means possible to make him do better. They tell him, as his teacher has told him before, that he is not trying, that he is not trying enough, that he's too used to having his own way and that it's time for him to stop being a baby and grow up and to take responsibility by learning to read. They talk to him at length. They bribe and punish, spend hours going over his schoolwork with him. And they can't understand why all that extra effort doesn't bring him more success with the written word.

Why Is a Child Learning Disabled?

There are several reasons for a learning disability. It is not because the parents haven't tried or don't care. It is not because the child is stubborn, dull or lazy. It is not because the child is spoiled.

There is no known simple explanation why a child has learning disabilities. In fact, there seem to be many causes that are responsible for learning disabilities. Complications could have occurred before, during or after birth. The problem could be heredity. There are many families in which reading disabilities can be traced through several generations. Usually the father, an uncle or other relatives had the problem.

It is not worth agonizing over which of these factors produced the problems of a particular child. It might be something not even mentioned here, not known yet. Placing blame, pointing an accusing finger, feeling overwhelmed with guilt, giving way to fear that some thoughtless action produced a child's learning problems have never been found to help parents help children with the problem. The causes of learning disability are beyond teacher control as they are beyond parental control.

Parents' Feelings

Exasperated...puzzled...uncertain...frantic...exhausted...helpless...hopeful. These are the feelings of the mother or father of a learning disabled child. He is bewildering. He drains parents and teachers. When they are with such a child, adults who are otherwise competent feel helpless and inadequate.

It's hard for any parents to accept the fact that they have a learning disabled child; for some it becomes an almost overwhelming tragedy.

It is best that parents try not to dwell on the future in their own minds. They can plan realistically for today, tomorrow, next week,

even a few months ahead. But it is unrealistic to become preoccupied with the long-range future of a young child. There is not yet enough knowledge; there are too many variables; there are too many unknown factors for this kind of stewing to be in any way useful.

It is vital for them to develop their sense of humor in every way they know how. Laughter helps surmount many a hurdle, and it gives the child a terribly important unspoken message—that life is basically sunny despite all his difficulties. Comical elements can be found in many situations, even though they are sometimes pretty hard to see. When the whole family can see the humor in some of the experiences they go through together, it's really worth it.

There are stages that parents go through with their perfectly normal looking, intelligent child, who doesn't learn or behave as other children his age do. A whole gamut of emotions must be faced before parents can grapple effectively with the stark truth of a child's having learning disabilities. There is no set order to these feelings. Usually they start with denial and, most often, end with acceptance and hope.

Can Anything Be Done?

More than ever before, there is great hope that a learning disabled child will be able to function effectively in our society. We know so much more than we did previously. More professionals, as well as parents, are becoming alert to the problems of the learning disabled child earlier in his life. Some years ago a youngster's problems would not be recognized until the sixth grade, unless they were severe or combined with disruptive behavior. Now they are likely to draw attention in the second or third grade and it certainly should be no later. Most services are becoming available to both the children and their families.

The most important thing a parent can do is provide structure in the child's life—order in

his space and sequencing in his time. There needs to be a place for everything in his room. Shelves are often preferable to drawers because he can see his things in their proper place, rather than having to visualize what's in a drawer. Structure can be introduced into his time by making him fully familiar with the parts of each of his usual routines—what comes first, next and last.

It is obvious that all children need to be rewarded whenever they succeed, with praise, a gesture or some form of approval. But even the best of parents cannot salvage the ego of a child who has failed and failed again in school, in the neighborhood and on the athletic field. Often a tutor, a special class or a special school is necessary to provide the therapy needed to make this child feel competent, to show him that he is capable of doing something about himself, that he is the master of his own destiny.

There are times when it is necessary for parents to consult a psychologist or psychiatrist. It is the job of these professionals to help build the ego strength vital for every child's development. If a child feels victimized by his learning disabilities or seems totally unmanageable or depressed, these are the times when it is frequently necessary to consult a professional counselor. Sometimes play therapy, sometimes an individual therapist who talks with the child, sometimes group therapy can help a child. These methods can also help his parents cope with the reality of living with learning disabilities. The fears, the anger, the guilt, the anxiety that are suffered by both the child and his parents can become better understood and thereby eased.

Seek Professional Help

If by the second grade a child is really not doing well, and if a good deal of what has been described earlier can be recognized, it may be worthwhile at this point for his parents to seek competent professional help. They should find the diagnostic center near them

that knows the most about learning disabilities and have the child tested.

If there is no diagnostic center close enough, they should try to find a psychologist whose specialty is testing and who knows the evidences of learning disabilities. It is important that the results be interpreted to them in detail.

There are many psychologists and psychiatrists, even today, who do not know much about learning disabilities. Parents need to be aware of this, because a learning disabled child needs structure in his therapy just as much as he needs it in other areas of his life. How do parents find out if a therapist understands the unique problems of learning disabled youngsters? They ask such questions as:

- What do you look for to decide whether a learning disabled child needs therapy?
- How would you explain the purpose of therapy to a learning disabled child?
- How do you work with the child who has trouble expressing thoughts in words?
- What can you do with a child who can't focus his or her attentions?
- Is it effective to work with a child without working with the parents?
- How do you see the relationship of low self-esteem to a child's learning disabilities?
- Under what conditions do you recommend medication?
- Can you explain to me the relationship of learning disabilities to my child's social problems?

It may be that the parents have confidence in the therapist to do an initial evaluation but are not sure that this is a person they trust to work with the child and themselves. An evaluation consists of the therapist's meeting with the parents once or twice to take down the history and to understand their concerns, having one or two sessions with the child and then an interpretive session with the parents.

After the diagnostic evaluation, parents have a right to ask the therapist or counselor some questions that will give them an impres-

sion of how he or she views their child and to see if the evaluation meshes with their own observations. There should be some new information from the evaluation, but they should also be able to recognize their own child.

A therapist qualified to work with a learning disabled child must be able to answer questions in clear, simple terms because he will be dealing with a child who has difficulty in processing language. If the therapist is vague, obscure, full of technical jargon not understandable to the parents, it is quite likely that he will not be effective with the child either. He also will not be able to give the kind of support to the parents that they need. If parents do not feel positive toward the therapist, they should set about finding another therapist in whom they can place their confidence. One needs a positive supportive relationship to proceed with the difficult work ahead. Helping the learning disabled youngster is a joint effort; trust in the therapist is necessary. The therapist who understands learning disabilities can have an enormous impact on the child's behavior at home and at school, and he can have a marked effect on the parents' attitudes and their ability to manage the child. The therapist can affect the comfort and well-being of the whole family.

Brothers and Sisters

A learning disabled child can provoke intense emotions in his brothers and sisters and complicate their lives in ways which they inevitably will resent at times. They wanted a perfect brother or sister of whom they could be proud. For just as parents are blamed by neighbors and shopkeepers for unacceptable behavior of their learning disabled child, so brothers and sisters often are held responsible by their peers. A youngster may feel resentful at being labeled "Weirdo's sister," or at having a child she scarcely knows come up and say, "Hey, do you know what your brother did?"

or "Is your sister dumb or something? She can't read!"

They may feel put-upon when they are urged to include the learning disabled one in their play. He has few friends of his own and it is natural for parents to seek occasional relief, to expect cooperation and a sharing of responsibility from their other children. But he can be such a drag to take along. They have to watch him every minute to see he doesn't hurt himself, destroy someone else's possessions or disappear. He wrecks any hope of making new friends that day. They can't go far or move fast.

Or little sister may be perfectly behaved, but she doesn't understand the simplest things, and they have to spend so much time explaining. They may feel mean and guilty for feeling this way because they really do love their brother or sister. They care deeply in spite of the irritations. It's a rare family whose siblings are not extraordinarily understanding at times and don't come through in emergencies. We can't expect more. They must come to terms with the problem the same way their parents do.

Growing Up Learning Disabled

I can't do anything right. I'm no good. I'm dumb. I'm a retard. Nobody likes me. Everybody's picking on me.

These are some of the feelings that the learning disabled child shoulders as he grows. He doesn't understand or he misunderstands

many aspects of his life, and he receives correction or criticism which he translates into "Everybody's picking on me." It probably reflects his real view of the situation because he doesn't interpret the correction or criticism as being helpful. Often he sees his world as a series of mistakes, one after another, all totaling personal disaster. It's hard to grow up feeling good about himself under these conditions. If he has special skills, a learning disabled child can feel good about his success in sports, his artistic talent, his popularity with a group, but deep down inside him there is still that gnawing feeling of "What's really wrong with me?"

This is why straight talk is so important. It is vital that the child hear over and over again from different sources that he is intelligent, that he needs more time to learn than others, but that he will make it in the world. He needs as much information about himself as he can handle, and he needs it frequently. He may still feel dumb. But, at least, he knows he is not retarded and does not have any progressive brain disease or whatever else he may secretly dread.

In many ways, life seems unfair to him. He perceives the world in the only way he can, and he meets rebuff or ridicule as a result of what he says or does, based on that perception. This youngster is often brought into child guidance clinics because someone thinks he is an angry, willful, unmotivated or spoiled child who is purposely not performing well at school. This frightened child cannot, rather than will not, perform well at school.

He's angry at the world's demands on him—demands he cannot meet. He's angry at himself for not being able to do what he wants to do. He's angry at his parents, teachers, brothers, sisters, neighbors and classmates for seeing him in the act of not being able to do. He's angry at God or God's representatives in church or synagogue. He's angry at being what he is.

The delayed maturation keeps the child with learning disabilities from acquiring the

skills which are needed for independence. He has become a teenager by his number of years; he may have the physical size and puberty development of a teenager, but his neural development and his behavior are like those of a much younger child. Yet the world expects his behavior to be appropriate for his size.

Independence usually relies on organizational skills. Self-sufficiency means taking responsibility for oneself. A learning disabled child can learn many specific everyday skills to enhance his self-reliance, and the feeling of competence he derives from mastery sets him up for more accomplishment.

What's Really Important?

In the end, what counts are human qualities. A person's sense of himself, his feeling of comfort with himself, and thus his ease with others are what matter. How many adults do you know whose knowledge of spelling or trigonometry makes any difference to you? Does it matter how good your friend's handwriting is or how many historical facts he can recite? Is it important that your friends be athletic and scholarly as well as talented in some artistic field? The chances are that you want to be with a person who is fun and caring. You want a friend who laughs with, not at you, who can share your worries as well as your pleasures. You want someone you can count on whose word is good, and who comes through on promises, who doesn't keep score on favors given and received. To be a good friend, to be a fine mate, to become a good parent—these are crucial roles in our society and roles which the learning disabled child can fulfill.

Helpful Organizations

Association for Children With Learning Disabilities
4156 Library Rd
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
Purpose: To provide needed information and support, to follow the latest educational and medical research, to support legislation for special classes and trained teachers in the field, to help interested persons find the ACLD nearest them.

Closer Look
P. O. Box 1492
Washington, DC 20013
Purpose: A national information center for parents and professionals, providing practical advice on how to find educational programs and other kinds of special services for handicapped children and youth.

The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Dr.
Reston, VA 22091
Purpose: To provide an information center for general and specific information on learning disabilities, to publish useful material.

National Easter Seal Society
2023 W. Ogden Ave.
Chicago, IL 60612
Purpose: To be a source of information on publications concerning the learning disabled child, to provide clinics, to sponsor research and workshops.

The Orton Society, Inc.
8415 Bellona Ln.
Towson, MD 21204
Purpose: To study preventive measures and treatment for children with specific language disability, to sponsor research and share their findings.

Texas Association for Children With Learning Disabilities
1011 W. 31st St.
Austin, TX 78705
Purpose: To provide information and resources, including reading lists, to offer guidance on working with local school systems, to sponsor an annual conference, to coordinate 35 local councils across the state which offer lending libraries, films and speakers, sponsor monthly programs and sometimes provide direct services.

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Produced June 1980 by Public Information Services, Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, P. O. Box 12668, Austin, TX 78711.

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